

Look for the person, not for the star

By Jim Taylor

Comet ISON has been an astronomic disappointment. After putting on a brilliant show in November as it headed towards a close encounter with the sun, it seems to have disintegrated as it passed through the sun's searing atmosphere.

Had ISON survived -- comets usually get their names from their discoverer, in this case the International Scientific Optical Network in Russia -- it would have passed close by the Little Dipper and the north star, Polaris, right around Christmas time.

The coincidence of timing is too much for me to ignore, even if the comet itself no longer exists. Could the star that the Bible says hovered over Bethlehem have been a comet?

With their bright heads and long glowing tails, comets might seem to point at something below them. Although comets were commonly considered omens of bad luck in those days, a comet seems a more likely symbol for identifying a particular location than any conjunction of planets or a flaring supernova.

Indeed, Chinese and Korean astronomers did record a comet, around 5 BC, that apparently hung in the skies for 70 nights.

And when astronomers work the cycle of Halley's comet backwards, they conclude that it would have passed earth in 12 BC.

Problems with numbers

Granted, neither of those happened in the year zero. They couldn't, because the Roman counting system didn't have a zero. So the calendar switched over directly from 1 BC to 1 AD.

Well, no, actually, it didn't. The Roman Empire kept right on counting years the way it always had. No authority figures paid attention to a baby's birth in a small village in a troublesome corner of the empire for some time.

It wasn't until some 525 years later that a monk named Dionysius Exiguus applied the same process as Halley's astronomers -- he worked

backwards, using known historic records, to identify the year that Jesus was born.

Unfortunately, he got it wrong.

That's because Roman numerals made calculations very difficult. Just try multiplying MMXIII by XXXLXV, minus XIV, without converting Roman numerals into Arabic notation. (If you must know, that's the number of days since Jesus' supposed birth 'til today -- not counting leap years, which Julius Caesar also miscalculated around 40 years before Jesus.)

Also because Exiguus didn't have zero to work with. Zero didn't show up in European mathematics until about 75 years after Exiguus died.

But even more, because Exiguus didn't set out to define the date of Jesus' birth. He merely wanted to establish a consistent date when all Catholic churches would celebrate Easter. Splitting AD from BC was a by-product of religious liturgy.

So the actual year when Christmas happened is somewhat uncertain.

Does it matter? I don't think so. A faith that requires Jesus to be born on exactly December 25, in the year 1 AD, will be fragile, easily shattered by contrary evidence.

His reality doesn't depend on a date-stamped birth certificate. Or on DNA analysis. Or on ossuaries found in ancient tombs. It depends on the effect he has had, and continues to have, on us humans.

The person matters, not the date or the star.

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YOUR TURN

In response to last week's column, Beth Burgess wrote, "What a lucky young man you were to have had such a wonderful and gracious mother -- and to remember her kindness. I remember the first Chinese restaurant in our neighborhood growing up. My father was against any terms used against any race that might be demeaning. I noticed some of the terms that we heard when that restaurant opened in our 'lily white' neighborhood. I was told in no uncertain terms that not only should I never repeat those words, but that using them hurt others, and, of course, would mean I would taste soap, literally.

Maybe not as strong a lesson as what you learned from your mother's actions, but a lesson indeed about how we need each other -- and to be kind to each other. We became regulars at that restaurant, in a time when eating out was really a luxury."

Jim Henderschedt thought the story of my mother and her Chinese gardener sounded like "the inspiration for a book. It has a Pearl Buck ring to it and reading it this morning brought out the warmth of the sun on a cloudy and dreary day."

The story reminded Jim McKean of Matthew 25: 35-36 "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit." (The Message Version.)

Jim continued, "Stories like these bring hope to a hurting and insular world. This one sure brought me hope for a better future."

Laurina Tallman found a personal application: "[Your mother] gives me the example of courage I need every day. No doubt, she wished she had set out sooner; I need that message every day, too."

"Your mother was an angel of mercy and very brave," wrote Larry Joose. "The world needs more people like her so that barriers can be broken and hopefully compassionate acts will build connections (communities). Thanks, the personal stories really hit home."

The story made Dale Perkins think of "a quote from Frederick Douglass, the African American Abolitionist 1818-1895: 'Those who profess to favor freedom, yet deprecate agitation are men (sic -- remember he wrote this in the middle of the 19th century) who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.'

"I only hope there are more 'risk-takers' in the church -- like your mom."

Dan Wilkie wrote, "I believe this is an example of what is so often needed in order to bridge the gaps in our often fractured humanity. For I believe that only

when we let go of ideologies and reach out to each other as individuals, serving, praying with, and helping one another that we can ever hope to truly have any kind of chance at harmony and peace.”

Isabel Gibson saw the story from victim’s viewpoint: “What a lovely, hopeful piece. I wonder how it changed Gong-On’s end-of-life experience, knowing that your mother cared enough to look for him.

“It is so hard to reach beyond our fear -- sometimes, after all, it will still end badly. But if we don’t, it will always end badly. Not much of choice.”

Joan Burrows had personal recollections of my mother: “I was touched by this story of one of your mother’s acts of kindness. Reminded me of being with her in a group back in the late '60's or '70's, I think, when both your parents, and Bob and I, were part of some group discussing sexuality ... still back in the days when that was not an openly discussed topic in the community, let along the churches! I am not aware that we came to any startling conclusions, nor can I actually recall any of the content, but I do remember your mom and her gracious and often wise contribution.”

Nan Erbaugh, Alan Reynolds, Christa Bedwin, and Charles Hill all sent notes of thanks.

Ivan Gamble also had a memorable mother: “Your article also reminded me of my own mother, a little woman who bore 12 children. I am the 9th. Of Methodist background, she was also a real 'pacifist'. Once, someone said to her, ‘Mrs. Gamble, I think you would even say something positive about the Devil.’ She replied, 'Well, he is pretty smart.’”

Following up on last week’s letters and my comments, Steve Roney wanted to explore the conditional nature of forgiveness: “Jesus’s attitude of forgiveness towards the woman taken in adultery, tax collectors, and so forth, contrasts dramatically with his attitude towards the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, and money-changers in the temple. For the latter, he seems to have no message of forgiveness. Why? Because forgiveness requires repentance. Almost everybody seems to miss this. There is no forgiveness without repentance; with repentance, forgiveness is immediate.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The lectionary offers a choice of Psalm 146 or Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke. Given the season, the choice was obvious.

- 47 My body bulges with new life;
the joy of it shines in my face.
48 I wasn't sure I wanted to be a mother.
I wasn't ready to assume that responsibility.
But now I'm so happy!
49 Now I know that prayers can be answered;
50 The deepest longings of the heart can take flesh.
51 I will be the best mother there ever was!
You don't have to be rich or famous to nurture new life;
you don't need big houses or expensive nannies --
you need love.
52 The most important person in the world lives inside me;
my unborn child matters more than prime ministers or presidents.
53 I feed my child with my own life blood;
I will nurse it with the milk of my own body.
No one else in all the world, no matter how rich or powerful, enjoys that privilege.
54 I care for my child the way I know God cares for me.
55 As the child lives in my womb, so I live in the womb of God.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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